

# Shark nets in the spotlight

*How many more sharks and other harmless animals must be killed before meshing is removed?*

**S**HARK NETS OFF SYDNEY BEACHES are part of our culture, having given comfort to swimmers for over 65 years. However, it is a common misconception that shark nets physically prevent sharks from entering shallow waters. The nets, which are set on the bottom, do not reach the surface and are open at both ends, so sharks swim over and around them. Those that try to swim through them (from either direction!) become entangled and immobilised in the wide mesh, and 'drown'. This is the only purpose of shark nets—to reduce the population sizes of sharks and thus the threat to swimmers.

In July 2003, the New South Wales Fisheries Scientific Committee (an independent group of scientists) released, for public comment, a proposed recommendation to list the current shark-meshing program in New South Wales waters as a 'key threatening process'. Today 49 beaches in greater Sydney, Wollongong, Newcastle and the central coast, covering some 200 kilometres of coast, have nets set at least 13 days per month.

Mesh nets were first introduced off Sydney beaches in 1937, when shark populations were abnormally large and shark attacks numerous. The sharks were attracted to offal from the Homebush abattoirs, which was discharged through the sewage outfall at Malabar between 1916 and 1970. In the first 17 months of meshing, 1,500 sharks were killed. But the number of sharks killed each year has progressively declined due to falling populations. The 2001/2002 figure was just 69.

A combination of relatively late maturity and low reproductive rates means that sharks are unable to replace depleted numbers. Shark populations around the world have dramatically decreased due to various human activities. In Australia, seven shark species are listed as threatened, including the endangered Grey Nurse Shark and vulnerable Great White Shark, while two species of

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wobbegongs have declined in New South Wales. All four of these are killed in shark nets, as well as numerous other animals (whales, dolphins, Dugongs, seals, turtles, rays, bony fishes).

There have been only three fatal shark attacks in New South Wales since 1970, the last in 1993. This is surprising, considering that Australia's population has increased by 50 per cent, Sydney's population has almost doubled, and the numbers of international tourists and water users have greatly increased. Clearly individual risks of shark attack are very low.

Nevertheless, New South Wales governments of both major parties have failed to make public any review of the shark-meshing program. The press has

reported that the Premier has refused to remove shark nets off the New South Wales coasts, citing swimmer safety. The move by the New South Wales Fisheries Scientific Committee to put the shark-meshing issue out there for public discussion is a step in the right direction.

Those people in favour of shark netting cite the lack of fatalities and serious shark attacks on Sydney's surf beaches since it began, as justification for its continuation. However, such reasoning ignores the cessation of meshing for three years during World War 2 (that is, even without meshing, there were no fatalities). It also ignores the fact that over 1,300 kilometres of New South Wales coast are unmeshed, yet attack rates are miniscule.

Shark netting has not occurred during the winter months of June and July since 1983, and May and August were added as non-meshing months in 1989 with little public fanfare. Meshing should now be stopped during September and October, as there has never been a Sydney beach attack in these months since the first record in 1791.

A detailed risk analysis, starting with data for the three dangerous shark species (Bull, Tiger and Great White), must be conducted and made available to the public. If the results indicate protection is still warranted, alternate methods such as drum lines as used in Queensland need consideration.

In its attempt to guarantee the impossible—that is, freedom from shark attack or any other accident for every individual human that enters the water—the Government is paying a high environmental price, and without public debate. How much time must pass, and how many more sharks and other harmless animals must be killed, before the meshing is gradually but steadily removed? □

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